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ABSTRACT

The specific purposes of this study were to examine (1) age differences in the sophistication of influence strategies children use to affect parents' consumption decisions, and (2) whether or not parents differentially reinforce such strategies according to the child's age. Data were gathered by observing the interactions of 145 parent-child dyads in the cereal aisles of two supermarkets. The dyads included 82 girls and 63 boys, of which 49 were judged to be preschoolers, 80 to be grade-schoolers, and 16 to be adolescents. Observers recorded children's use of eight types of influence strategies. Strategies were assigned to three separate groups according to the degree to which they involved understanding of the internal state of self and other, and the use of explicit, implicit, or psychological power. Success of influence attempts was also recorded. As predicted, older children used more psychologically sophisticated negotiation strategies, particularly emotional appeals. Parents did not differentially reinforce their child's attempts according to age-related expectations. Unexpected differences were found between the two observation locations. (RH)

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Age differences in children's strategies for influencing parents' purchases

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As adults, we engage in a wide variety of actions which may collectively be referred to as "consumer behavior". A question which has been of interest to psychologists is how such behavior is learned. In an early paper, Ward (1974) characterized research in this area as being descriptive of relations between demographic factors and consumption behavior. Ward argued that it is important to look at the process of consumption in order to understand causal relations between a variety of predictors and consumption outcomes. From this point of view, important studies would look at whether parents consciously guide their children's development through the differential reinforcement of age-appropriate behaviors, or are less systematic in their responses to their offspring.

One of the earliest forms of consumer behavior in the marketplace is the child's attempt to influence what his/her parent purchases. Previous studies have suggested that children are able to influence their parents' consumption of many market products (Ward

and Wackman, 1972; Atkin, 1978). Children's attempts seem to be most frequent and successful if the product is one which is used by them, such as a toy or a box of breakfast cereal. These studies have not, however, looked at the strategies which children use in order to gain favorable outcomes for themselves, nor at parents' responses to these strategies.

One might expect, according to a model of the development of interpersonal negotiation strategies (Selman, 1981), to find age differences in the type of influence attempts children use. Briefly, Selman suggests that a child's ability to understand another person's perspective affects the negotiation strategy that he/she will use. He describes five levels of strategies through which children and adolescents are thought to progress.

At Level 0, both self and other are viewed as non-psychological means or barriers to goals; influence occurs through the use of physical force, termed explicit power. At the next stage of development, both self and other are accorded the capacity for independent thought, however, one will is expected to conform to the commands of the other because of the other's greater perceived power. At this level, negotiation occurs through the use of implicit power, i.e. threats. At Level 2, psychological processes are recognized, and each is seen as open to changing her/his mind. Influence is achieved through the use of psychological power, i.e. the power of persuasion. Levels 3 and 4 are characterized by increasing attempts at collaboration, integration and synthesis of perspectives.

Models of cognitive development have informed psychologists'

thinking about other consumption behaviors, such as children's understanding of monetary principles (Strauss, 1952). It seems appropriate, then, to look at age differences in children's use of negotiation strategies in their attempts to influence their parents' consumption. Selman's (1981) model is well-suited to serve as a conceptual framework for making predictions about the forms which those different strategies might take. It is true that Selman's model applies to negotiations with peers, and that somewhat different expectations about children's interactions with their parents might exist because of the difference in power structures which exist in child-peer versus child-parent relations(Youniss, 1980). However, because as children get older they have an
increasing ability to take the other's point of view into account, and to manipulate another's psychological state, we would expect somewhat similar age sequences in the appearance of various influence behaviors.

The present study attempted to clarify the process by which children influence their parents' consumption, and to determine whether parents systematically socialize the use of developmentally sophisticated negotiation strategies by their children within the context of decision making. The study had two specific purposes.

1. First, we examined age differences in the sophistication of influence strategies which children use to affect parents' consumption decisions.

2. Second, we examined whether parents differentially reinforce these strategies according to the child's age. This would indicate conscious socialization of children's influence strategies.

Method

Subjects: The interactions of 145 parent-child dyads were observed in two supermarkets. The dyads included 82 girls and 63 boys. Children were also assigned to age groups; 49 were judged as preschoolers, 80 as grade schoolers, and 16 as adolescents.

Procedure: When a parent-child dyad entered the cereal aisle, an observer positioned herself unobtrusively so that all interactions could be overheard. The observer pretended to be a shopper who was examining the list of ingredients on a cereal box, or consulting a shopping list. The observers, who had been trained to a satisfactory level of agreement, recorded the parent's sex, the child's sex, and the child's age.

In addition, the observer noted the use of eight types of influence attempts by the child. The eight categories were constructed by the authors on the basis of informal observations of children's interactions with their parents, and on the basis of judgments of what types of attempts children should be making, according to Selman's (1981) model. The eight categories are as follows:first, non-verbal, which included attempts to sneak the product into the cart, grabbing the box, or pointing and gesturing; second,

attention-direction, including statements such as "I need some (product)." "Can I have one (product)?" "Look, mom, see this!"; third, reference to peer pressure, such as "Everyone eats this." and "Johnny likes this."; fourth, reference to advertisements or media characters, including explicit mention of Smurf or Strawberry Shortcake cereal, or saying "I saw this on T.V." and "The T.V. says moms love it."; fifth, reference to premiums or prizes which are available in the box; sixth, emotional appeals through guilt induction, flattery or bribery, exemplified by "You haven't bought me anything in a long time." "You never buy me anything." "If you get me this I'll never ask for anything again." and "Please, pretty please, you're the best mom in the world!"; seventh, references to the cost or quality of the product, including "This is on sale" "This doesn't cost very much." or "This one tastes good."; and eighth, alluding to a previously arranged deal and collecting on it, as in the statement "You said I could have this if I ate a healthy breakfast this morning."

The strategies were assigned to three separate groups according to the degree to which they involved understanding of the internal state of self and other, and the use of explicit, implicit or psychological power. The use of explicit power occurs when the child views both self and other as non-psychological means or barriers to goal achievement. Negotiation occurs through the use of physical power, which in this situation would involve the grabbing or taking of a desired product, or nonverbal instruction of the parent to take the box of cereal off of the supermarket shelf.

Selman describes implicit power strategies as those which recognize the independence of the two parties' wills. The individual uses threats, orders and commands to influence the other. He cites bullying as an example of this strategy level. We assigned the following strategies to this level: attention-direction, reference to peers, reference to media and reference to premiums. These strategies, while more sophisticated than the nonverbal one, focus on the child's own wishes or will. Calling attention to the fact that a friend has one, that the television mentions the product or that there is a prize in the box is not calculated to appeal to the other's wishes or needs. Rather, it in effect says "I want this." By contrast, the use of psychological power involves some attempt to incorporate the other's point of view. Each person is regarded as capable of making a choice and being open to influence through bribes, reasoning or empathy. We assigned emotional appeals, reference to cost or quality, and reference to past agreements with the parent to this level. Each of these strategies recognizes that the other's point of view may be different from one's own, that the other makes choices based on reason and/or feeling, and that these reasons and feelings can be manipulated.

Finally, the observer recorded the outcome of the child's influence attempt, that is, whether the parent purchased the requested brand, another brand, or nothing.

Results

1974) suggested that sex of the child might be among the individual variables which affect a child's influence on parents' consumption behaviors. Ward No sex differences were found in the types of influence attempts which were used, nor in their success.

As predicted, older children did use more psychologically sophisticated negotiation strategies, (2, N=145)=11.42, p<.01; in particular, they used more emotional appeals (2,N=145)=6.15, p<.05. (see Tables 2 and 3) Parents did not, however, differentially reinforce their child's attempts, according to age-related expectations.

Unexpected differences were found between the two locations; at supermarket B, children tended to use more sophisticated strategies (1,N=145)=3.91, p<.05, but overall, their attempts resulted in fewer successes (2,N=145)=7.84, p<.05. (see Tables 4 and 5)

Discussion

As Youniss (1980) and Selman (1981) would suggest, older children use more sophisticated negotiation strategies to influence their parents' consumption, indicating that they perceive the psychological will of the parent and attempt to modify it through the use of psychological power. However, parents apparently do not consciously socialize the use of more sophisticated strategies since they do not differentially reinforce types of influence attempts according to

the age of the child.

In order to better understand the dynamics which were occurring in the interactions we observed, it is useful to think about the effects of two sets of variables, situational factors and the parents' perceptions of the influence situation.

Several situational differences may have affected the process of influence in the two locations.

First, supermarket B was a newly opened hypermart which featured savings on staples of approximately 20% off the price of the item at supermarket K. Therefore, economic factors appeared to be salient in parents' purchase decisions at that store, and in children's use of selected influence strategies. First, children may have perceived the importance of economic determinants of parents' purchases, and used more sophisticated influence attempts, such as cost/quality appeals, in response to this.

Second,because the hypermart had recently opened and because of the economic advantage, the cereal aisle was almost perpetually crowded, requiring parents to devote more energy to maneuvering their cart and to making consumption decisions, and leading to less attention to their children's requests. In response to parents' distraction, children may have felt the need to resort to more psychologically powerful strategies, such as emotional appeals.

Rather than responding to the nature of the child's influence attempts, however, parents seemed to respond to situational factors, given the significant difference in success of influence

attempt by location. Perhaps the children in the hypermart were not able to generate persuasive enough strategies to compete with the economic or environmental pressures on parents.

Even when children were able to make sophisticated influence attempts, their parents were not likely to reinforce the children for their actions. In order to understand this, it is important to understand how parents perceive this specific influence situation. Is this interaction viewed as an opportunity for parents to teach their children the principles of brand selection, or is it seen as another attempt on the part of the child to manipulate the parent's actions? If viewed as the latter, it might not be wise for parents to reinforce increasingly sophisticated negotiation strategies.

It seems likely that situational factors will affect the parent's perception of the consumption situation, and the child's behaviors in that situation. If economic factors become salient, the situation may become one in which the parent tries to maximize his/her economic gains, independent of the child's requests. Crowded conditions may make the shopping trip an ordeal to be completed in as little time as possible, again making the parent less likely to pay careful attention to his/her child's demands. Future research should attempt to clarify both parents'and children's perceptions of this specific influence situation, in order to better understand the process of socialization of consumption behavior.

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